Does Exposure to Concept Products Affect Judgment of Marketed New Products?

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Concept products are prototypes featuring a very innovative design and technical functionalities, used to be exhibited at trade shows and at industry events. Results of two studies show that exposure to concept products affect consumer evaluation of marketed products, and that such effects are contingent on the degree of visual and functional exaggeration featured by the concept product, as well as on the degree of visual and functional alignment between the concept and the marketed product.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In some industries, it is a common practice to develop prototypes that are very innovative and that are loosely coupled with the actual product that is subsequently marketed. These prototypes are referred to as concept products, and are usually exhibited at trade shows and at industry events. They typically feature technical functionalities that are very innovative, sometimes too advanced to be implemented on large scale production, and are typically characterized by an extreme design, often too futuristic to be featured by marketable versions without substantial adaptations and moderations.

By means of theories on the effects of exaggeration and on structural alignment, we argue that exposure to the design and functionalities of concept products may affect consumer evaluation of marketed products. Specifically, we predict a positive effect of exposure to a visually exaggerated concept product on the judgment of the marketed product (H1): when a novel design is preceded by exposure to its exaggerated form, i.e., the concept product, exaggeration may attract subjects’ attention to the distinctive features of the design more than in the case of exposure to a non-exaggerated exemplar (Rhodes, Brennan and Carey 1987; Mauro and Kubovy 1992; Rhodes and Tremewan 1996). Moreover, the emphasis on the distinctive features of the design provided by exaggeration is feasible to leave a stronger trace in subjects’ implicit memory. This trace may eventually enhance the ease in elaborating those features when subjects encounter other exemplars, more moderate, of the same design, thus enhancing their evaluation. We expect, however, that functional exaggeration of the concept product moderate such effect (H2): On the one hand, we expect that exposure to an exemplar featuring very high (extreme) levels of performance on a given functional feature may set a new standard for the judgment of other exemplars on that same feature, causing a contrast effect that hurts the judgment of the other exemplars (Herr, Sherman and Fazio 1983; Herr 1986). On the other hand, however, the occurrence of such contrast effect is contingent upon the degree of context-target similarity, i.e., occurs only both the priming (concept product) and target (marketed product) are judged as belonging to the same category (Stapel and Winkielman 1998). An exaggerated design (high visual exaggeration) may favor the perception of the concept product as less thematically or temporally related, thus reducing the contrast effect due to the concept product exaggerated functionalities on the judgment of the moderate target product.

Concept products may feature different degrees of visual and functional alignment with their respective marketed versions. For instance, firms may invest in developing and promoting a very advanced technological feature within a concept project, but then implement and promote different features in the moderate marketed version. Similarly, they can develop very innovative and futuristic designs for their concept products, but then base the actually marketed products on different and less disruptive designs. We argue that the visual alignment between the concept product and the marketed product influences negatively the judgment of the marketed product (H3), since it activates a ‘thematic link’ between the two objects in consumers’ mind. The more the two products are visually aligned, the higher likelihood that they are judged as belonging to the same category and thus compared in terms of functionalities. Once this link is activated, it leads to an implicit comparison between the technical features of the concept product and those of the marketable product. In the case in which the concept product features high functional alignment with the marketable product, then the very high (extreme) levels of performance on the technical functionalities are likely to influence negatively the evaluation of the marketable product, since the latter typically features more moderate levels of performance on those same technical functionalities than the former. However, it may be that the concept product features different technical functionalities (low functional alignment) than the marketable car. Therefore, it is less easy for consumers to compare the features of the concept product with those of the marketable products, since non–alignable differences are harder to compare than alignable differences (Markman and Gentner 1996; Gentner and Markman 1993). In such case, consumers would be less likely to be influenced by the extreme performance of the concept product when they evaluate the marketable product (H4).

Results of two experimental studies using concept cars and cars as stimuli support our hypotheses and show that i) exposure to a visually exaggerated concept product positively affect the judgment of a moderate product featuring a similar design, and moderates the negative effects of the concept product functional exaggeration; ii) the degree of functional alignment between a concept product and a marketed product negatively affects the judgment of the marketed product upon exposure to the concept product, with this effect being moderated by the degree of visual alignment between the concept product and the marketed product. Our results contribute to shed light on the role of concept products on the evaluation of marketed products, thus emphasizing a different way in which the use of design in the initial stages of new product development may enhance new product performance.